Dharmette: Limbs of Awakening (5 of 5) Equanimity

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So, hello everyone, and welcome to this last talk on the *seven limbs of awakening*. And the seventh one is equanimity, *upekkhā*, in the Pāli language, and it's considered to be one of the most precious emotional states, mental states, that practitioners touch into and experience. Sometimes it's seen as being the most mature form of love, the most mature form of *vipassanā* practice, insight practice. And it's a phenomenal thing to begin getting a sense of this capacity we have, this wonderful capacity for equanimity.

Growing up, I think that I probably knew what the word equanimity kind of meant, but it was never really used. I don't think it was an active word in the vocabulary of the people around me or myself. So it was never really a concern of mine.

But one of the great things that happened in practicing *vipassanā*, I discovered as this insight practice matured for me, was that there was something very particular that was equanimity. It wasn't an abstraction. It wasn't just an ideal, kind of vague idea, just nice to be equanimous. It was something very specific, almost like if you, you know, touch your palm with the finger from the other hand. It's very specific, that contact. You can feel it, the sensations. You feel the pressure.

It was that kind of clear. There's a thing called inside; it's equanimity. And it was kind of a place of warmth, a place of glow, a place of non-reactivity, a place of well-being. It had a wonderful pleasure or joy or happiness in it that almost couldn't be described as such. It was almost like that wonderful happiness of not having something kind of troublesome happening at all.

And so the word *upekkhā* in Pāli comes from the word “to see” and “to look upon.” So, to look upon. Sometimes it's understood to have the big picture of the situation.

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There was a recent time when I was driving down the big boulevard nearby here, El Camino. I wasn't driving fast or particularly in a hurry, but I did like the idea of not having to stop for a red light. But then the light in front of me that I was approaching turned red on me, and I knew that at that intersection there's a long wait. But I gazed further down, and I saw that the next couple of lights down the boulevard were also turning red. And I thought, “Oh, it doesn't matter that this one turned red for me. It's not going to put me behind. The next ones are going to be a little bit later to turn green.”

So I had this bigger picture of the situation, and I just kind of relaxed and was content and happy to sit there. But if I'd only seen my light and not seen any of the bigger picture, there would have been a little bit of something inside of me being impatient or feeling disappointed. “Oh, I missed that,” and, you know, I'd be a little bit impatient waiting for it to turn green. But having the bigger picture, I relaxed about it all. I was more at ease, and it provided me with equanimity for it all.

I do the same thing with the red lights by just feeling, knowing, and feeling that sometimes the little energy of tensing up to be impatient, waiting for it to turn green, doesn't do me any good. It's pointless to do, and it's not going to change the light any. And so the bigger picture is this is not needed. It's not helpful. And I settle back and just be there peacefully with equanimity.

So, to have this bigger picture, to see with wisdom—it's sometimes called the equanimity that is seeing with wisdom. But it's really kind of a sense inside, a place of balance. I think sometimes of a balance pole, a pole that is well rooted in the ground, stable. Everything else is moving, but if you hold on to the pole, then you're stable, you're secure. And there's this stable balance pole within. It's very balanced and stable.

If I stay close to that or allow it to be the reference point, everything else can settle and be peaceful. Or there's an analogy that I've used also. If we're in a very busy city with lots of people and cars and honking and noise and people rushing around, it can be kind of jarring and a little bit discombobulating to have all this spinning around. But then there's a little park, maybe a teeny park, a ten-foot-square park, that has a lawn. No one's walking on the lawn, but it's clear that you're allowed to go on it.

And so you step onto the lawn and you sit down, just maybe cross-legged or sit on a little bench in the middle of it. And it's so much better because you're now some feet away from all the hustle and bustle of the town. It's nice to be in it, but you still feel it all in the sound, and you wonder if anybody's going to, you know, come over and join you. But then magically, this ten-foot-square lawn begins to grow and grow and lift a little bit and grow. Nothing—the

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city stays all fine, good—but it becomes bigger and bigger.

It becomes a bigger and bigger lawn, and becomes a little hill, and becomes a nice hill with a great view. And everybody is still doing—the world is doing all the things that it's doing. Nothing has changed in the world, but this wonderful safe lawn, the bigger and more distant it gets from everything else, it just feels more and more safe. More and more, there's no need to be concerned about the people rushing around and the honking and people yelling. "Are they yelling at me?"

And it's more and more peaceful, and you have this kind of relaxed way of being, non-reactive. So, this equanimity that can grow inside is kind of like that lawn, where everything can stay the same in the world, and maybe even within us in some ways. But there's this softness, this peacefulness, this place of stability and balance, non-reactivity, that is a thing, as clear a thing feeling inside as the finger touching the palm. But it begins to grow and expand. And it's clear that this is good.

There's no need to question it. "Oh, equanimity is not safe. I shouldn't be equanimous. You know, this is not going to change the things in the world." No, it's not going to change things in the world. But you're changing because you feel this growing and growing thing. Why abandon yourself to anxiety?

Why abandon yourself to resentments and ill will and even to conceits? Why give in to clinging and tightness? Why not just relax? It's okay to sit there with the red light and be at ease. It's okay to have challenges; you still have them. But it's okay to abide in this place of peace or equanimity, and maybe from there respond to the world with wisdom.

So, when equanimity is taught by itself, it can seem either a very high bar or can feel very uninteresting, like indifference and kind of a detachment from the world and disinterest in the world. And some people are even frightened by the very notion of equanimity. But equanimity is always built on a very strong foundation. For the *seven limbs of awakening*, it's built on the first six. So you don't have to worry too much about equanimity. It'll find you as these limbs of awakening grow and develop and are there to support you.

And it's like if you have, you know—anyway, yeah. Another place where equanimity has phenomenal support is in the *ten perfections*, the ten *pāramīs*. It's the last of the *pāramīs* that's built on having developed capacity for generosity, for being ethical, for knowing how to let go in a healthy way, on wisdom, on this vitality, on patience and patient acceptance of the truth. The truth itself, truthfulness, and resolve—a wonderful vow or kind of commitment, a resolve and aspiration—and loving-kindness.

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With all those present, then equanimity begins appearing. It's like now there's a very strong support, and equanimity becomes the refuge. Equanimity is one of the greatest refuges, short of letting go of clinging, non-clinging. And so non-clinging is also now built on these wonderful things. Non-clinging is not a nothing; it leaves you with nothing. Letting go in a deep non-clinging way is built on the foundation of this.

And in terms of the *seven limbs of awakening*, the way that they're talked about in the classic instructions on mindfulness, on the *four foundations of mindfulness*, the idea is that these seven limbs are meant to be grown within. The literal word in Pāli is to be filled with it, to be fulfilled in it. They are to be fulfilled within us, fully filled within us. They grow and develop and flow through us. They are not things to let go of. They are not things to dismiss.

They're not things to kind of see as being, you know, one more thing to let go of. This is what allows letting go. Even a certain kind of letting go of themselves is seen as interfering with the fullness of these qualities.

So, to combine these two weeks we've done now, the five bundles the Buddha talks about letting go of—occasionally he treats them or refers to them in kind of strong language—that these are an illness, these are kind of poison, they are burdens, they are really kind of vacuous. And these should really be let go of, should disappear. They're not needed. All these bundles, gatherings of clinging, and so on. On one hand, these get let go of.

We untie the bundles and let everything fall away and be free again, so they're not tied up. And on the other hand, the Buddha emphasized the growth of these beautiful qualities, and these go hand in hand. The untying of the bundles makes room for the growing of the seven limbs, our natural biological capacities for these seven wonderful qualities.

So I hope that these two very central teachings from the Buddha may become alive for you in some way. And I hope that today's teaching on equanimity gives you something that you can find in yourself that can be a refuge, a support, not just for yourself, but so you can be a refuge for others. In this world, we have a lot of people who are anxious and scared, like that little five-year-old girl on the boat ride. May we, with all our wisdom, all our goodness, integrity, be a refuge for the world with our equanimity.

So thank you all very much for this. And next week I'm back on retreat again at IRC, and I will—we have—I'm so sorry that I can't tell you who the teacher is next week for you, too. But all these teachers we have are really wonderful, and so very rewarding. It's gratifying to hear so much praise of the teachers who come when I'm not here. So please take good care of the teacher who comes and appreciate them and support them, and we will all continue.

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And in a week from Monday, thank you.

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